

I'm afraid of no toast

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.



Designers John Cook and David Bishop, and coder Tony Crowther were well ahead of the curve when they dreamt up their C64/Amiga shoot 'em up, Phobia, in 1989. Arthropod blaster, Apidya, was still three years away, and many of the

major blockbuster movies we associate with being irrationally scared out of our wits by one usually harmless thing or another hadn't yet hit the silver screen; Arachnophobia (1990), IT (1990), Braindead (1992) and Cliffhanger (1993) to name a smattering of the most memorable ones from my childhood.

Of course, phobia-fiction stretches back much, much further than the '90s, and phobias are as old as fear itself. The point is, with Phobia they pulled something a bit different out of the subconscious, I mean hat. No, I was right the first time, surely? It's more than a game; if you can rack up a high score, you're demarcated as a 'fear basher', making you - I suppose - your own intergalactic therapist. If cognitive behavioural therapy isn't cutting it, maybe it's time to think outside the box?



I can assert all this with a degree of authority because I'm from the future; a time-traveller looking back into the abyss

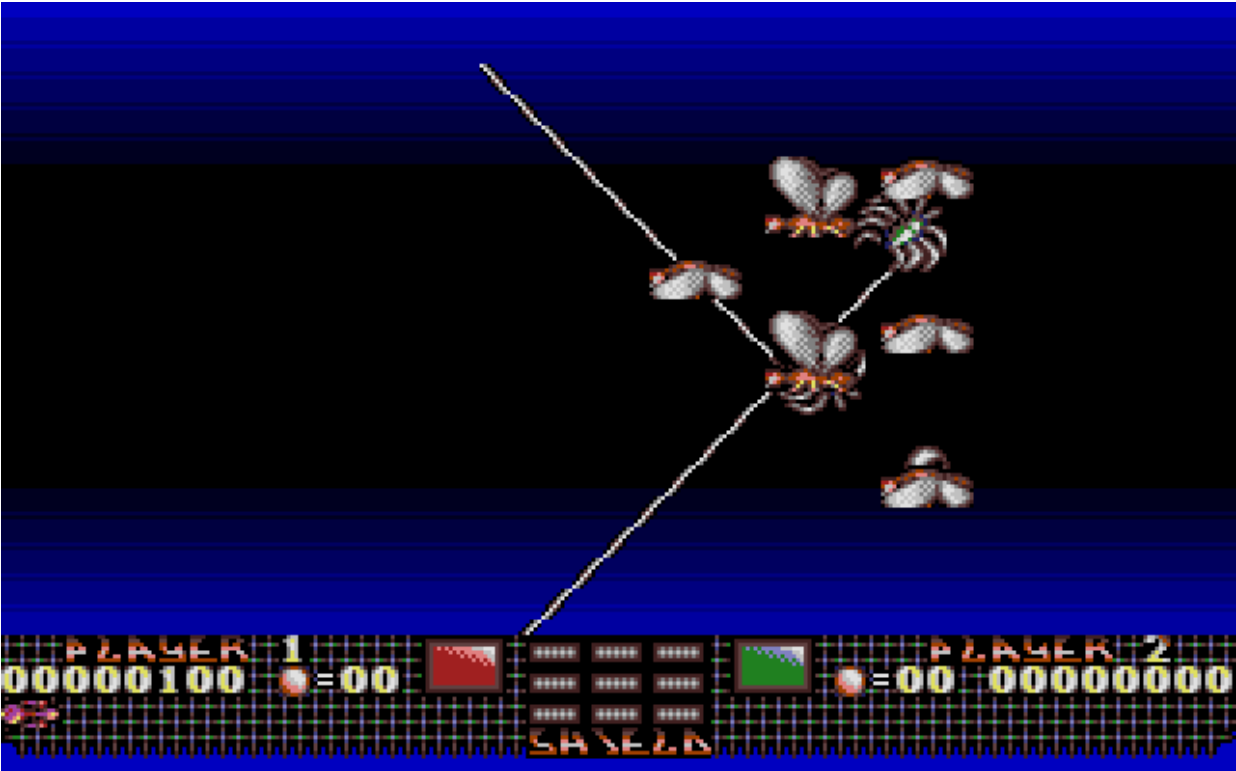
of '80s entertainment pop culture that has now had its day. It's all yet to come for you guys, you'll see. It'll be a blast! Anything you want to know, ask away.

A thumping, energetic dance track from talented Ocean composer, Dean Evans, gets the game underway, though sadly only plays over the menu. In-game sound effects are perfunctory at best from then on.

From the opening menu screen, we have the option to switch into high-resolution mode, effectively enabling interlacing to turn on high-definition graphics, albeit reducing the playfield. If this monkey's with its position on your display you can re-jig it with the cursor keys. In either mode, the game is presented in a palette of 32 colours, and visually isn't a massive upgrade over the C64 prototype, also featuring 32 colours despite the system technically only being capable of handling a maximum of 16. This was made possible via the C64's less powerful hardware through the magic of a rapid colour-cycling trick, conveying the illusion that more colours are being engaged than they really are.



Scrolling is silky-smooth on either platform, while no fancy parallax is in effect. In the Amiga port, instead, sets of gradients are deployed, top and bottom, separated by an expanse of space void. On other levels, supplanting the gradients, 'rollers' seem to spin on their axis, or dance, mimicking the bars of a hi-fi equaliser.



Phobia, whilst borrowing heavily from coin-op shmup classics such as R-Type and Salamander, *does* manage to shake things up a bit by introducing a selection of novel organic themes, as well as an imaginative cabal to stitch them all together.

Phobos, brother of Deimos and Greek god of phobias (although the manual fails to mention what would seem to me to be a pretty relevant detail), has kidnapped the Galactic President's daughter and is holding her ransom on the surface of the sun, the core of the Phobos planetary system, which - shock, horror! - is rather damn hot!

To be able to approach it without being burnt to a cinder in order to stage a rescue mission, we'll need to amass nine components of a protective shield acquired from nine different planets orbiting the sun. These are chosen from a potential assortment of fifteen in a semi-non-linear fashion; a kind of Blockbusters style decision tree if you will.



It's funny you should mention Bob Holness (*who did?*) because he once voiced James Bond in a radio adaptation of Dr No, and Roger Moore is known to suffer from 'hoplophobia'; the fear of firearms. *He* wouldn't be much use heading up a mission to annihilate Lord Phobas' army then.

It's a pity really because we'll need all the help we can get. This being a relentless, unforgiving, hard-as-nails shooter, the planets don't just roll over and say, "here, take my critical lump of sun shield". They're all in on the conspiracy so we have to take them by force.

Every thrust of the way is littered with environmental obstacles encroaching onto the ever-shrinking, claustrophobic playfield, reducing our manoeuvrability to nigh on zero (you may recognise the jabbing spikes in particular from Salamander). More often than not we'll find ourself defeated by a ceiling to floor blockade rather than the

hatchlings of a neurotic's overzealous fever, or the lack of an auto-fire facility.



On a positive note, pain is somewhat alleviated by the very welcome and unusually benevolent 'keep your power-ups when you kick the bucket, and pick up where you left off' mechanic. Be grateful for small mercies - the measly three lives we begin with certainly won't offer any.

Each end of level guardian is protected by an energy shield barrier powered by a generator. Sabotage the generator by shooting all the tokens and we get to tackle the great fear-mongering lummox and claim their chunk of the sunshade. That's if we can reach the end of the line in the first place - no walk in the park to put it mildly, unless that park is located on Elm Street and we're trapped in a deep, restless sleep being tortured by a Nightmare.

In most games, our prize would be instantly awarded. Here it's dangled like a carrot on a stick... at the end of an extended subterranean post-boss battle rat-run sequestered inside a protective egg, posing as a question mark. Obliterate

the egg and the planet implodes, preferably shortly *after* we evacuate with the booty.

For the sadists amongst us who haven't suffered enough, believe it or not, there's a 'silly mode' that can be activated before commencing the game that will make the AI that bit smarter and the baddies even denser, if that's not an oxymoron.

If you've ever been freaked out by anything from the 'Top 50 pointless things to be scared of because you haven't got enough proper stuff to worry about list', you can guarantee that Lord Phobos has incorporated it into a specific phobia and fashioned a planet's theme around it to jab a spoke in your wheel.



First up is one of the biggies; the arachnophobia level, chock full of eyeball-flinging spiders, which by David Bishop's own admission emanated from his loathing of the more typically web-spinning critters.

Conkers! He should have tried conkers, they work wonders to keep them at bay in my shed. It's not just an old wives' tale.

Where was I? Ironically the spiders themselves should be the least of our concerns. Their webs are more of a threat than *they* are, given they can obscure the entire playfield, leaving us nowhere to turn to take evasive action.

To accompany them (the ones in the game, not my shed) you'll find all manner of other creepy-crawlies, insects, wasps, bugs and a garden-load of their freaky soil-fellows - enough to keep your typical towny wide awake in terror at night for several months.

Survive long enough to escape the stage and we get to experience 'Snakes on a Planet', the unofficial prequel to Samuel L. Jackson's 2006 action flopbuster. Even the thought of this level themed around fear of the slithering, appendage-challenged serpents aka ophidiophobia would have Indiana Jones quivering in his fedora!

Everywhere we look are twitching (ratt)ler tails, dancing, wiggling sandworms, Arabian palaces, coiled cobras, and a giant fire-sneezing dragon guardian.

If you squirmed your way through Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* then perhaps you might want to swerve the planet that revolves around ornithophobia. No doubt the pelicans, eagles, grasping prehistoric claws, mountains of feathers, detachable pecking beaks, and hummingbird boss would have you tearing your hair out in hysteria faster than Bill Oddie could reach for his binoculars and camera.

Pulsating, fractured light bulbs struck me as a tad strange initially until I remembered that these are often used to keep unattended eggs or newly hatched chicks artificially

incubated. Chicks that will swiftly develop into fully-fledged, vicious death-bringers!

Even the flouncy, 'harmless' butterflies look menacing when we know one collision is enough to send us to an early grave, though of course that applies to *everything* we encounter in Phobia.

Speaking of which, the most imaginative level is modelled on the fear of death itself, known as thanatophobia. On planet morbidity, you'll be hounded by such cheery delights as gravestones, skulls, coffins, bats, crows, gallows, haunted houses, ghouls, decapitated heads, guillotines, and demons.

Another memorable stage features killer dentures and dental torture devices - I mean instruments - the correlation being odontophobia, otherwise known as fear of dentistry.

As if all that wasn't enough to keep us on our toes, Lord Phobos has sent out his Sun Troops to block our path with Light Barriers. While these can be broken with a sacrificial drone, we'll have to visit moons orbiting the planets in the Phobos system to track them down first. Complicating matters further, not all of them harbour drones in the first place, only those that flash on the map screen.

Drones are activated via the return key by default and will provide extra fire-power, though bear in mind that if *they* sustain a hit, *we* die too, so we must choose when to use them wisely.

This being a shoot 'em up, we'll need to sustain ourself with a steady diet of power-ups if we're to accomplish anything, which we won't anyway because Phobia is evil and the odds are callously stacked against us rather like a coin-op cash-guzzler that only exists to turn a profit.



Regardless, spikey blue pods - left behind when we destroy enemies - can be collected to boost our ship's engine power and rate of fire, or confer extra lasers or an entirely new weapon such as bombs that hug the contour of terrain before impacting an enemy unit. In that respect, it's much like *Gradius* or *R-Type*, two genre-defining shmups that set the tone for everything that followed in so many ways.



Another power-up is especially aberrant for a shooter - or game in general - given that snagging it affects the behaviour of our *enemies* rather than our own craft; as *we* begin to flash *they* cease firing, providing a limited period of respite from the tumultuous trepidation.

In two-player mode - our only hope of making any real progress - defying all logic, we can shoot the rear of our partner's ship to unleash three interminable missiles. I can't say I've seen *that* particular strategy employed in any other shoot 'em ups... and probably with good reason. It makes no sense! Still, neither does blasting away irrespective of our partner's presence while ammo volleys sails right through their ship without making so much as a dent... the defacto standard for practically every other shmup.

It appears to have been this sort of schismatic nuance that appealed to reviewers at the time, especially those who assessed the Commodore 64 edition who were far more disposed to overlook the punitive difficulty levels.

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Play [T]ape or [D]isk game version ?  
TAPE: You've to play ALL levels. Counts  
       for planets only, not moons!  
DISK: Minimum of 9 planets is necessary  
       for a full Sun Shield, then Sun!  
NOTE: Warning! You can't fly back, so  
       watch your step!
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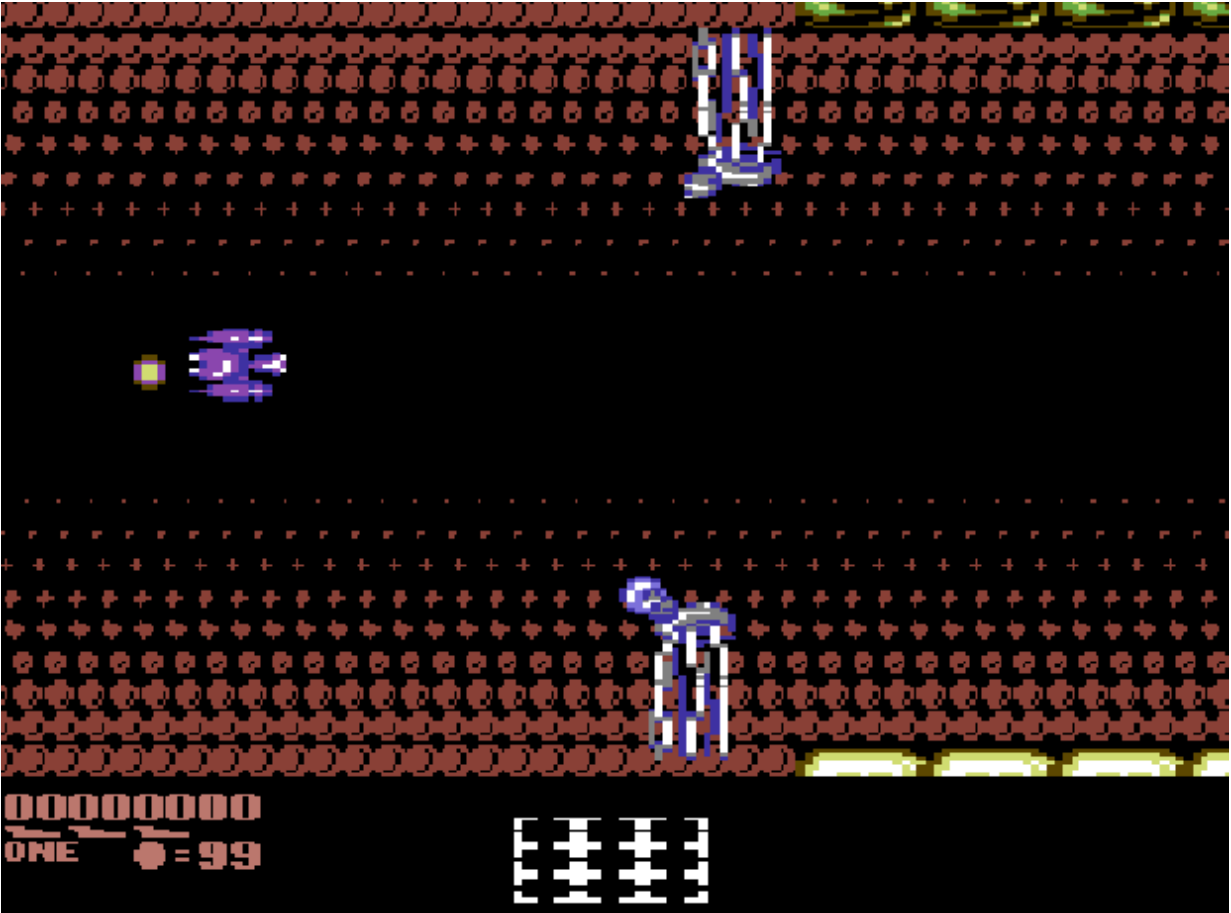
"Apart from the lack of music, Phobia is superb - pretty graphics, extremely addictive blasting gameplay, even the multi-load isn't too intrusive. The best 64 blast since Armalyte."

88% - Computer and Video Games (July 1989)



"A superlative shoot-'em-up chock-a-block with colour, graphic detail and scarifying levels."

92% - Zzap! (July 1989)



On the Amiga side of the equation, reviewers set the bar that bit higher and generally felt let down by what felt like a hastily polished C64 port. Disgruntled by the apparent lack of care and attention, they weren't nearly so amenable to turning a blind eye to its drawbacks.

"This has the looks and sounds of the top coin-ops from earlier this decade - which is pretty good going. Perhaps a few improvements in the gameplay and overall difficulty could have pushed Phobia up to that 900 rating."

805 - ACE (August 1989)

"Phobia on the Amiga does not measure up to its predecessor on the 64, unfortunately. It is a horizontally scrolling shoot em up, and the scrolling is fine, the screen colourful, but there is simply too much going on at once on the screen. At times it is impossible to get through a wave of aliens, as there are so many, in addition to bullets, bombs and missiles all aimed squarely at your ship. A difficult game is fair enough, but this is crazy. Sound is about average, which pretty much sums up the rest of the game."

63% - CU Amiga (August 1989)

"Phobia on the 64 proved one good looking, highly playable blast and the Amiga version had the potential to do likewise but in even better style. The graphics are certainly detailed and everything is larger than life. But the simple parallax scrolling is unimpressive and the colour scheme isn't subtle enough to create the nightmarish atmosphere needed - it all looks garish and hardly frightening. Thankfully it's all very playable R-Type-ish shoot-'em-up fare, but not one to turn you into a nervous wreck."

73% - Zzap! (September 1989)

"The only possible criticism of the game is that it is terribly difficult. For experts like myself, there is a "silly mode" which makes it even more impossible. Overall, a game that strikes a rare balance between playability and impossibility, providing entertainment which gives it a long lifespan. Real value for money."

76% - Amiga Computing (September 1989)

"Shoot-em-ups don't come much tougher than Phobia, and you'll be thankful it has a two-player option. But it's just a shoot-em-up and, though it's as good as most and despite a few nice touches, is not one of the best".

72% - Amiga Format (September 1989)



If you think I'm exaggerating about the insane difficulty curve, why not get in your time machine and travel to the year 2017 where I live and check out the longplays of Phobia on YouTube? You'd have a wasted journey if you did because they don't exist seeing as no-one appears to be capable of completing the game, even with the infinite lives trainer enabled. Aside from this unofficial hack, apparently, no cheat has been discovered, if one was ever implemented.

Of the 15 levels on offer, only a handful have been identified. It's hard to say if the remainder have ever actually been seen, let alone *beaten* - I couldn't even find a text walkthrough as evidence of their existence. Allegedly, there are planets inspired by hydrophobia and pyrophobia yet I doubt I'll live long enough to visit them.

Evaluating a game based solely on the two minutes in which you're able to survive is a tough call, and no-one enjoys a backside full of fence splinters! Conceptually it's a goldmine, gameplay-wise it's an absolute nightmare. Appropriate then that this is the only way I'll get to experience it. Maybe you can join me on the other side for a two-player co-op sesh? Good Nytol!

